

Shopping center debate continues

Target proposed for Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Speakers at a lengthy public hearing on the proposed Target development Monday night painted diametrically opposed scenarios of its impact.

Proponents of the center say it could be the answer to a worsening unemployment crisis. Critics say it would be the death knell for small and mid-sized local businesses.

Commissioners were still hearing public testimony past midnight on The Overlook, a proposal that would include a Staples office supply store, a Longs Drugs store, a McDonald's restaurant and numerous other shops and fast-food restaurants.

The City Council could take up the matter at its Jan. 23 meeting.

Judging from applause Monday night, most of the more than 100 who showed up at the hearing were opposed to the proposed development, including representatives from other shopping centers in town who feared competition from Target and other stores in the newer, more modern facility.

Other speakers reiterated concerns the shopping center would damage efforts to revive Watsonville's struggling downtown, take land needed for housing and harm the delicate environment of the adjacent Struve Slough.

But proponents of the development said a much-needed infusion of funds into the public treasury — an estimated \$69,000 into city coffers and \$123,000 into the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument in favor of the development was that of developer Don Orosco.

"While we are not aggressively seeking an alternate site at this time, I can tell you we are being aggressively courted by people in the North County," Orosco told the

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commission. "This center will be built; the question is really whether the city of Watsonville wishes to avail itself of the various benefits that are put before you."

Orosco's firm paid for an economic impact analysis by the San Francisco-based Keyser Marston Associates that placed the number of jobs the center will generate at 816 — 462 of which would be full-time.

Critics called the number overblown, and said it would be offset by existing stores that would be put out of business.

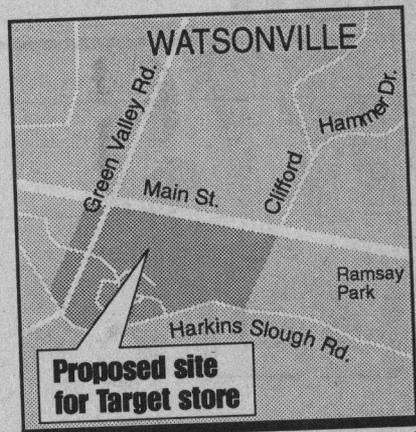
"I have the sense that you're giving up on what you have now," said Ernest Quintana, representing the 20 shops in Crestview Center on Freedom Boulevard. "You're favoring a new company at the expense of what we already have."

But other local business leaders urged city support of the development, saying it would go a long way toward stabilizing the seasonally fluctuating job market and providing entry-level jobs to area youth.

"This could provide us with a nonseasonal job base, plus seasonal jobs with a different seasonality than the food processing industry," said Paul Bennett of Naturipe Berry Growers. "It can provide a balance to the local economy."

But Dick Allen of Crestview Shopping Center wasn't convinced.

"What happens if the rosy projection of capturing leakage doesn't occur?" he asked, referring to the developer's study indicating most of Target's business would not come from downtown shoppers but from economic "leakage" or shoppers who take their dollars outside of the Watsonville area.



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"What will happen to Gottchalks and the unopened businesses in the downtown business incubator? I think the city of Watsonville needs to perform its own independent economic analysis."